

# South African Country Life



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THE REAL HEART OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

JANUARY 2006

## The Meerkat Man and his wild friends

How two women created this  
hideaway haven near Porterville

Believe it or not there's still an  
unspoiled valley in the Cape

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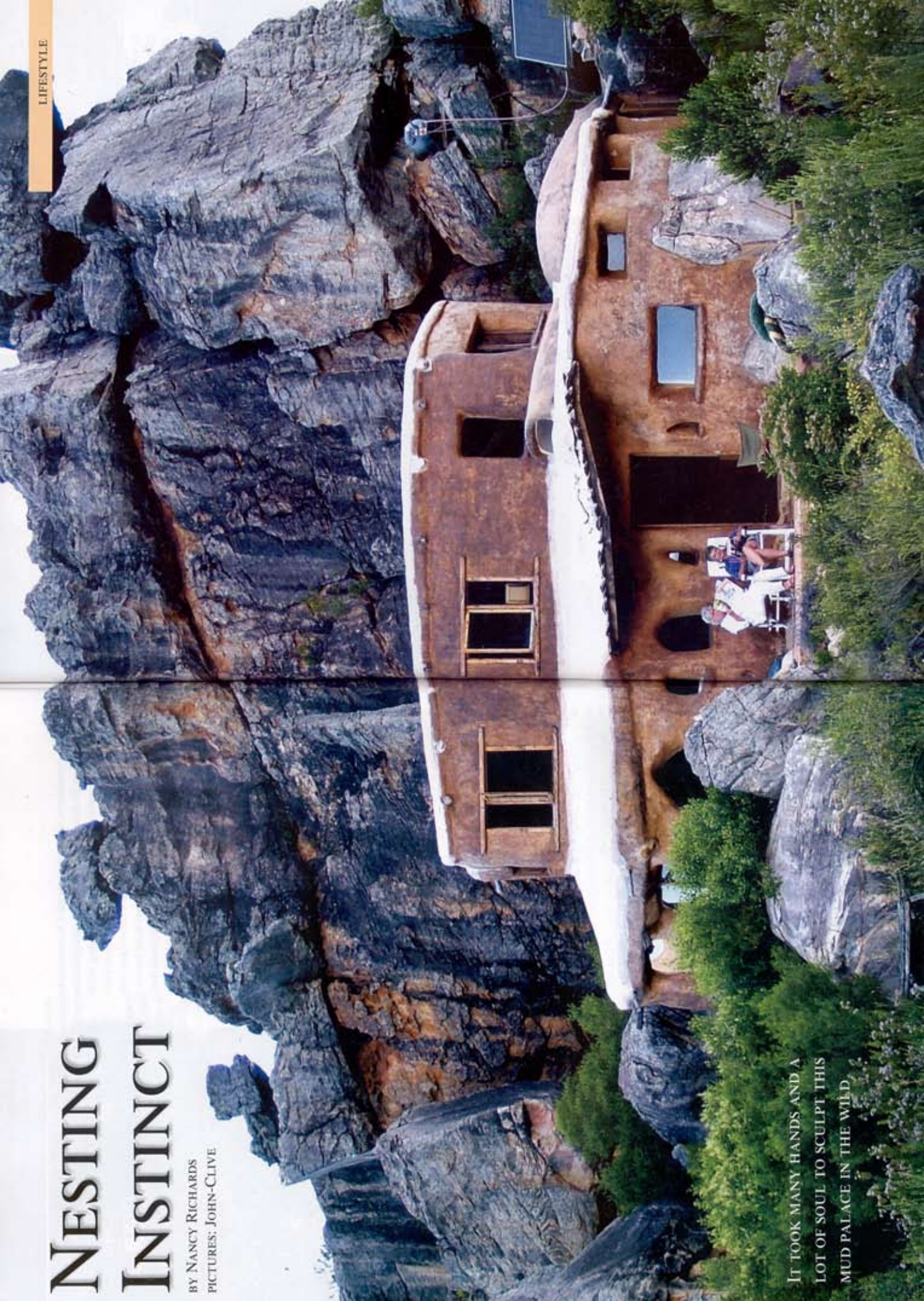


FOR THE BEST COUNTRY PROPERTIES

# NESTING INSTINCT

BY NANCY RICHARDS  
PICTURES: JOHN-CLIVE

IT TOOK MANY HANDS AND A  
LOT OF SOUL TO SCULPT THIS  
MUD PALACE IN THE WILD.



A TINY pair of horns appears up on the koppie and suddenly, silhouetted against the sky, a dainty klipspringer is doing a bambi. Seconds later it's followed by two more. Regular visitors, they are the quizzical family that come to keep an eye on the goings-on down at The Cobhouse. Val and Judy gaze back at them in a kind of mutual namaste moment: "I respect the potential in you". If this seems auspicious it's not surprising – because the spot on which the hobbit Cobhouse sits is at the very centre of a geological spiral. It is utterly grounded. The ultimate organically grown home.

Valerie Morris and Judy Bekker, Renaissance Business Associates, have been coming to this piece of wild in the mountains above Porterville for years. For the past 14 they've also been running Vision Quest bush retreats in the area (watch out for a story on these in a forthcoming issue of *Country Life*). But in 1998 they decided they themselves needed a retreat, a place to go to restore their own souls. First they got permission from the farmers who owned the land, then, after much searching, they located their site of choice. Their intention was to build a simple little hut on it but, as with so many things in life, one thing led to another and what finally emerged was a five-roomed, double-storey haven that took 229 people three years to build.

### AS YOU BUILD BY INSTINCT, WONDERFULLY UNPREDICTABLE THINGS CAN HAPPEN

The idea of building it out of cob (mud and straw) was sown when a friend came back enthused from a cob workshop. This was it – the ideal earth medium. Long-time cobbler Hetta Steerman got them started with two weeks of expert tuition. But, she told them, cobbing is not a job for which you hire contractors; tradition requires that you invite people to come and do it with you. Valerie and Judy's wide circle of friends, family, acquaintances and clients didn't need asking twice. They arrived and stayed for days at a time, filling pails, digging for clay, mixing, moulding, stomping, piling and plastering like so many weaverbirds.

"To anyone who expressed an interest, we sent a letter explaining that this was an experiment in natural resources and there was no payment, but we would feed them during their stay," Judy explains, rustling up a fabulously fresh lunch for us in the kitchen with its wall of raw rock. "We also asked them to bring a trinket or token of themselves that could be worked into the structure" – and sure enough, buried inside the walls or sunk discreetly into the surface are a whole bunch of things: fragments of sacred wood



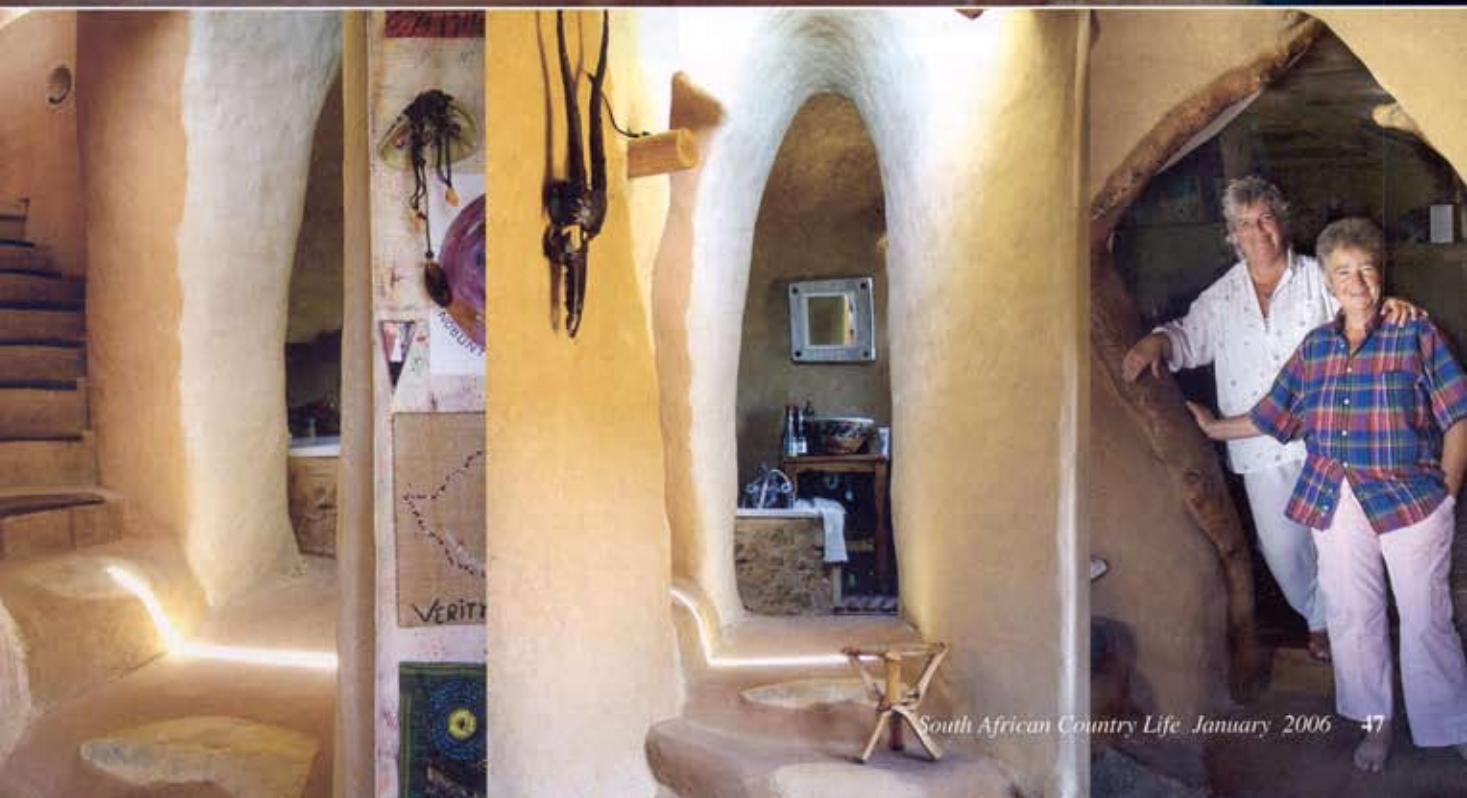
**TOP:** THE SPIRAL CACTUS POT REFLECTS THE GEOGRAPHICAL SPIRAL ON WHICH THE HOUSE WAS BUILT.

**ABOVE:** ROPE SKIRTING NEATENS THE LINE BETWEEN WALL AND FLOOR. THE QUILT IS A COMPOSITE OF HAND-WORKED PANELS BY VISION QUESTERS.

**OPPOSITE TOP:** ROCKS INCORPORATED INTO THE DESIGN ADD TO "THE FLINTSTONES"-STYLE INTERIOR.

**BOTTOM FROM LEFT:** THE COBBED STAIRWAY WITH ITS BARREL-PLANK TREADS.

THE "MALE" SHAPED ENTRANCE TO THE BATHROOM. JUDY (LEFT) AND VAL, FRAMED BY THE "FEMALE" ARCHWAY.



from India, copper from North America, a little cross, even a cassette of special sound. The overall cost of the house, Valerie estimates, was around R100 000, including the R40 000 it cost to feed the happy cobbers.

"Learning curve" would be too small a phrase to describe what building The Cobhouse taught these two women. There were no blueprints or plans; working around an outcrop of rugged rocks rather required being informed by anthills and swallows' nests. Some wasps recently followed suit by attaching a nest to the front door. Val affectionately refers to it as "the squatter camp".

While taking a break from lunch preparations, Judy recites the recipe for cob mix. It sounds like something fresh from the Bible: four buckets of sand, about one of clay, one of water and an armful of straw. She describes the process and the chain of hands that puts the cob in place. As you build instinctively in sections of 20 cm, it's very far from being an exact science. In the case of The Cobhouse this meant that, aside from occasionally having to rework dodgy bits of wall, wonderfully unpredictable things could happen. Such as accommodating two fabulously curved fallen branches into a perfect "female" formed archway between the living and kitchen areas.

You can feel this house breathe, so content is it in its setting. So content in fact that baboons have felt free to come and play on the domed roof and the spoor of creatures great and small occur all around it. Perhaps by way of protection – or simply because they're there – Valerie and Judy have laid out a crystal labyrinth nearby. But they invite only the most caring spirits to walk it. In the fynbos at the entrance to The Cobhouse is a statue, cobbled in clay by potter Erna Dry, of the goddess Amarava, Mother of all Africa, who, one can only imagine, must feel very much at home here. 🐘

MAP REFERENCE: F2 (SEE INSIDE BACK COVER)



## SERENDIPITY RULES

An extra dimension went into building The Cobhouse. An energy of consciousness and coincidence, perhaps the result of a group dynamic. But a tour around the house with the occupants (Valerie and Judy see themselves not as owner-builders but simply "stewards of the process") throws up a catalogue of extraordinarily unorthodox architectural detail.

- You can build a cob house only on a site where there's clay.
- In addition to the locally sourced clay and sand, it took 150 bales of straw to make this house.
- The total cost of the 50-odd windows, all car glass from Rockies Spares Parts, was R500, while just two small

regular meranti windowframes cost R700. The large window in the front room is a 1950s' Chevy windscreen, that was donated by a friend from a nearby campsite.

- At the suggestion of consulting environmental architect Etienne Brüwer it was decided to cob the staircase, which is set with rounded barrel-plank treads.
- The ceiling cladding in the living area is made from packing case rejects that the timberyard was pleased to see the back of.
- Of the six, eight-metre ceiling poles in the kitchen, one was that much longer and serves to prop up part of the stairway.
- A perfectly functional chainsaw mysteriously refused



**OPPOSITE TOP:** THE BACK BEDROOM. AN OUTDOOR SHOWER HAS BEEN FITTED INTO THE ROCK OUTSIDE IT. OF COURSE ONLY BIODEGRADABLE SOAP IS USED.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM:** ALTHOUGH A COBHOUSE IS TRADITIONALLY AIRED WITH VENTS ONLY, A COUPLE OF OPENABLE WINDOWS HAVE BEEN INCLUDED.

**ABOVE:** THE BATHROOM, WHERE THE CURVED WALLS CREATE A “WHISPERING” ACOUSTIC.

**ABOVE LEFT:** THE STATUE OF AMARAVA, MOTHER OF ALL AFRICA, WHICH WATCHES OVER THE WILD AREA WHERE THE COBHOUSE IS.

three times to work here, which meant cutting bluegum poles by hand – with respect.

- A gift of coils of rope from Ian Haggie of Haggie Rand came in handy as skirting between walls and floor and to “obscure our ineptitude” around the ceiling pole construction.
- The dome part of the cobbled roof was built around a curved sapling framework.
- A solar panel provides light for the 12-volt fittings. An especially grateful client did all the wiring.
- The finishing “plaster” is a mix of clay, sifted sand, donkey feed and linseed oil, and the interior walls have been sealed with Enviro-Touch clear paint. In some cases, BreatheCoat has been used for its ability to stretch and fill cracks.

- All the wood has been boraxed and the upstairs floor sealed with a mix of wax and orange oil.
- Underlying the fact that Val and Judy are just “stewards”, the finished “nest” is filled with offerings from its many builders. A shire-esque front door is from a furniture designer; a ceramic washbasin from some potters; painted and embroidered hanging panels from . . . the list is infinite.
- The house however, is not infinite. “We’ve been given permission to stay here as long as we’re able to keep coming. But when our time is up, the house will revert back to the land – which is just as it should be,” Judy says.